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ABSTRACT

The contemporary school principal performs an ever increasing number of complex, largely undefined roles. These roles, to be performed effectively, should be clearly defined; and the principal should be willing to move from the traditional administrative arena toward an acceptance of those new responsibilities designed to help him keep pace with current social and educational changes. Many of the documents reviewed here are concerned with some specific aspects of the principal's role, such as role perceptions and expectations, educational duties, administrative change agent functions, and guidance program responsibilities. The literature examined also reflects some of the problems inherent to the elementary school principalship and offers suggested remedies. Some of the material cited also speculates on the future of the principalship at the elementary level. (Author)

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The Role of the Elementary School Principal

Terry Barraclough

Elementary schools and the principals who administer them are close to the people, closer and more involved with school patrons than any other segment of the school system. Here the child is introduced to formal schooling, and this is the school that must help parents develop positive attitudes toward the school program. This is a crucial role and presents both a challenge and an opportunity to the principal.

Jarvis and others (1970)

The elementary school principal performs a number of largely undefined roles. Those roles must be defined, and both roles and principals must change to keep pace with society and with developments in the field of education.

The elementary principal's functions are complex and have stimulated a large body of research and speculation. The documents in this review are concerned with many specific aspects of the principal role: role perceptions and expectations, educational duties, administrative duties as a change agent, and responsibilities in guidance programs, among others. The literature also examines problems of the principalship and suggests remedies. Finally, some authors speculate on the future of the principalship.

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MULTIPLE ROLES

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (1968) examines the role of the elementary principal as it now exists and as it must evolve to meet the needs of the future. The forty-five unsolicited manuscripts composing the collection explore the principal's role in urban education, in human relations, and in the future of education.

The document also discusses the elementary principal's daily duties and his new role as educational consultant. In the area of supervision, he must be aware of the teacher's role. In the area of teacher preparation, he must keep up-to-date on research and must be involved in the student teacher program.

Concerning guidance, the NAESP document maintains that the principal must understand the role of the school psychologist. The principal bears the responsibility for hiring such guidance personnel as the school requires. He must be involved in the programs for disturbed and disadvantaged children as well.

The elementary principal must also communicate with parents. This area of responsibility includes report cards and grading practices. He is expected, in addition, to be in charge of discipline and school-community relations.

The manuscripts in this report also examine professional negotiations, teacher evaluation, reading, the role of the school secretary, the physical environment of the school, nongrading, pupil role, and administrative inservice training as they relate to the elementary principal.

ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

In spite of the need for dynamic leadership, principals tend to fit into prescribed roles (Wiggins 1971). The elementary school principal's behavior is shaped by influences within the school district that tend to value compliance rather than individuality. Research on behavioral characteristics of elementary school principals and analyses of school climate provide evidence that experience in an administrative role has a socializing effect on principal behavior.

The report notes little variance in behaviors associated with the administrative role. Research indicates that principal behavior is influenced more by the expectations of others than by the principal's personality. The roles and expectations associated with school administration are frequently incompatible with the personality and needs of the administrator.

Foskett (1967) reports the results of research designed to determine community attitudes toward the elementary principal role. Findings indicate that the community and the principal each hold conflicting views on the principal's role.

The principal is identified both as administrator and as member of the teaching staff. He is associated in part with each of the roles and not completely with either. This role ambiguity may lead to low morale and ineffective performance.

Noak (1969) compares perceptions of teachers and principals concerning assumption of the leadership role in handling specific tasks in the elementary school. For a survey of Illinois elementary principals and teachers he distinguished fifty-five specific tasks. Respondents were asked to identify the person responsible for assuming the leadership role in each instance. Results indicate wide disagreement relative to twenty-five tasks and moderate disagreement relative to twelve tasks. Most disagreement exists in the area of working indirectly

with building personnel in administration and supervision.

Two studies made a decade apart and in different areas of the country reveal a disparity between principal perceptions of actual roles and ideal roles (Melton 1971). The same design, instrument, sample selection procedure, and data analysis methods were used in both the 1958 Michigan study and the 1968 California study.

The studies compare actual and ideal roles in curriculum and instructional leadership, personnel guidance, school-community relations, administrative tasks, evaluation, and professional improvement. From the studies, Melton concludes that

> the elementary school principal has been and is still in a period of transition. He seems to vacillate between emphasizing his role as an instructional leader and as an administrator.

Saxe (1970) compiles survey data regarding the effect of recent urban ferment and upheaval on the position of the elementary school principal. The report, consisting largely of written statements by elementary principals, suggests that increasing importance is being assigned to the elementary principal's role.

THE PRINCIPAL AS EDUCATOR

A handbook by Benjamin (1970) provides the principal with specific guidelines for the supervision of classroom activity. The author explores psychological and sociological aspects of supervision; principal involvement in curriculum, instruction, and administration of educational activities; and inservice training of instructional principals.

Observation of a Harlem elementary school led Greer (1970) to conclude that the principal must continue being an educator and must maintain good relations with parents and teachers. The school's reading program is described in detail as the instructional leverage for organization of the school. The principal takes seriously her role as head teacher and subordinates her "executive" role to her role as educator.

Reading instruction is the keystone of an elementary academic program (Sweeney 1969). Full development of reading instruction, the author submits, depends on the principal.

Sweeney advises the principal to take a sequence of formal courses in reading instruction, including courses on theories and practical applications, remedial reading and diagnosis, and the organizational aspects of reading instruction. The principal should also teach reading and spend time in a reading clinic. observing and working with cases of reading retardation. Finally, the principal should continually update his information through participation in workshops and conferences.

THE PRINCIPAL AS CHANGE AGENT

A major responsibility of the school leader is to help change attitudes (Yonemura 1971). To be effective administrators, principals must act as change agents.

Tye (1970) investigates the concept of change, basing his study on two assumptions. First, under certain conditions, the single school is the most strategic unit for educational change. Second, again under certain conditions, the principal is the most effective change agent.

Tye posits eleven conditions necessary to stimulate change. The principal must

- assess himself frequently
- understand the role expectations of others

- understand the components of effective leadership
- understand the change process
- be cosmopolitan
- be efficient in group dynamics
- define goals with the teachers
- have a background in administrative theory
- be research literate
- lighten his own burdens
- establish priorities for change

Meiskin (1969) has different criteria for developing a climate of change. He asks that the principal involve staff members in planning, decision-making, and communication. He should also develop a planning structure to make educational change an expected aspect of institutional growth.

Further, he stresses that the principal must define individual and total staff roles in the change process. He should create a sense, among all the staff, of belonging and sharing in the decision-making process leading to acceptance, modification, or rejection of change. To do so, the principal must be aware of the individual strengths and weaknesses of the staff.

Mahan (1970) also suggests that innovation management be shared. Questionnaire responses from teachers lead him to conclude that the principal and subject specialists are the most influential agents in initiating change.

MISCELLANEOUS ROLES

Counterpunching, or waiting for the other person to make the first move, is not necessarily the most effective method of administration (Cross 1971). The author advises principals to spend less time and effort reacting to requests, appeals, demands, and complaints initiated by others and more on raising issues themselves.

Cross asks principals to assess the patterns of problems reported, to avoid solving problems best handled by others, and to set up structures providing the bases for decisions without principal involvement. In addition, principals should delegate problem-solving tasks and seek opportunities to turn appeals and intermediary problems into creative solutions.

To Frank and Matthes (1970), the principal is an important element in establishing a guidance program at his school. He must support and encourage the program if it is to be effective. He is responsible for providing an adequate number of prepared counselors, identifying each staff member's role, evaluating staff effectiveness, and providing assistance when necessary.

The principal must also delegate responsibility to trained individuals, provide adequate materials and facilities, and schedule group guidance activities. The authors suggest that an advisory and policy-recommending body, such as a school guidance committee, be created.

Program evaluation, staff consultation, and inservice training are necessary elements of the guidance program. These, too, are responsibilities of the principal. In addition, he should coordinate guidance with the rest of the school program and interpret the guidance program to the community.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Becker and others (1971) identify some of the problems elementary principals face today. They cite the need to decide between the roles of educational innovator and plant manager as a first step in reducing role ambiguity.

> Perhaps the most critical problem faced by the elementary school principal today is the general ambiguity of his position in the educational community. There is no viable, systematic rationale for the elementary school principalship to determine expectations for performance; no criteria exists through which performance can be measured.

In addition, Becker and his colleagues assert that training programs are inadequate, emphasizing theory to the exclusion of practice. Certification programs vary too widely from state to state, and there is a shortage of resources to develop new educational programs or carry out existing ones.

Earlier, Becker and others (1970) conducted a national survey to determine the problems of the elementary school principal; the assistance available from federal and state agencies, colleges and universities, professional organizations, and regional educational laboratories; and the relevance of college and university preparatory programs.

The authors identify a number of problems in the areas of pupil personnel, instructional programs, administrative leadership, organizational texture, finances and facilities, and the school's relationship to society. The principals surveyed indicate that social changes seemed to create most new problems. They anticipate that the next ten years will see an increase in problems due to social developments.

The document includes three general suggestions to reduce the problems of the principalship.

> 1. Develop criteria which will explicitly define the role of the elementary school principal and which will provide a means of measuring performance.
> 2. Revise current pre-service training programs and certification standards to provide the principal with the specific knowledge and skills necessary for high-quality leadership in the elementary school.
> 3. Strengthen resource agencies and improve their effectiveness in supplying principals with the assistance they need in maintaining modern, effective instructional programs in the elementary school.

Within the scope of these general suggestions, the authors also list more specific steps to alleviate the principal's problems.

THE FUTURE OF THE PRINCIPALSHIP

The first step in humanizing the elementary school is humanizing the role of the elementary school principal (Brown 1970). A new definition of the principal's role must be developed. The principal should be an educational leader, should solicit help from specialists, and should develop a good working relationship with his staff. He should also become knowledgeable about learning theories and be able to implement them in the curriculum.

Mickish (1971) reviews the literature on male-female differences in the leadership and management roles of the elementary principalship. She argues that women can function as successfully as men in the principal role and recommends nondiscriminatory hiring practices in the future.

In a status survey of the elementary school principalship in Georgia, Jarvis and others (1970) make several remarks concerning the future role of the principal:

> . . . the principal, during the next decade, cannot possibly become expert in the many fields with which he has contacts nor, even with considerable new wisdom, can he become the master of all he surveys.
>
> Versatility and inventiveness in group situations may become more important qualities contributing to leadership success in the principalships than an unfailing presence of the principal in his office.

Even the most talented principal finds his job unmanageable (Arends and Essig 1972). He is expected to be an expert in all subject areas and instructional practices, as well as in organizational management, building maintenance, equipment selection, community relations, and other responsibilities.

Arends and Essig suggest the development of new leadership positions to support and complement the principal. Their report examines the role of the curriculum associate in a differentiated staffing project in Eugene, Oregon. The curriculum associate provides guidance and assistance in curriculum and educational programs. Research data indicate improvement in many aspects of principal effectiveness since inception of the differentiated staffing project.

Southworth (1971) asserts that the elementary principalship will not change radically in the future. Because of increased subtleties in the society, it will become more professionally demanding. Future principals will have higher salaries, more sharply defined role responsibilities, and clearer and better relationships between teachers and themselves. They should consequently function more effectively as educational leaders.

To gather the documents in this review, *Research in Education* monthly catalogs were searched from January 1969 through March 1973, and *Current Index to Journals in Education* monthly catalogs from January 1969 through February 1973, using as search terms these descriptors: **Administrator Role, Elementary Schools,** and **Principals.**

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

In spite of the need for dynamic leadership, principals tend to fit into prescribed roles. *Wiggins (1971)*

The principal must continue being an educator. *Greer (1970)*

A major responsibility of the school leader is to help change attitudes. *Yonemura (1971)*

The principal and subject specialists are the most influential agents in initiating change. *Mahan (1970)*

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